Making space for people's quality of life

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Abstract

One of the features of Europe in the 1990s has been the goal of increasing the competitive edge offered by each region and city. In the search for new ways of attracting capital which is more mobile and less permanent, quality of life has become one element in the armoury of local places to wed capital to their location. In so doing, a specific view of quality of life has become the norm, and other elements of what defines a high quality living environment has been set aside. This paper considers, first, the limited evidence to suggest that quality of life matters in shaping capital's location decision taking and, second, illustrates some of the divergences between quality of life employed to capture capital and people's concerns about the quality of their lives.

Introduction

One of the principal challenges facing regions and cities across Europe is to be competitive. Indeed, from local government to the European Commission, there are repeated reminders that improved competitiveness is essential to ensure future prosperity. Such a competitive edge is no longer achievable on the basis of a single objective or condition. Rather in a world which, under globalising tendencies, is increasingly fragmented, volatile in its desires and demands, and global in its reach, there is even greater need to make space for aspects which offer some future certainty and which are amenable to local influence. It is in this context that quality of life with its relative ubiquity provides an important anchor, on which those involved in shaping the visions and trajectories of regions and cities can build. Peter Hall (1995, 20) expresses this most aptly: "since the sources of the new economic growth are so various and finally perhaps so fickle, the possibilities are endless. But one central element is quality of life. It is no accident that, as never before, rankings of cities dominate the media". Quality of life has, in effect, become a part of the competitive environment in which the objective is to make locations attractive to different global capital.

Quality of life and competition

There is considerable convergence of opinion in the literature that the fundamental context in which cities and regions are currently acting is one of heightened mobility of capital. The ability of transnational corporations – and indeed smaller, more local organisations – to switch their location of operation around the globe has created a truly global economy. The specific nature of the processes of globalisations and economic restructuring which are operating may continue to be debated, but there is an acceptance that places are being thrust into new sets of relations to capital; relations in which the relative position of the city is substantially weaker than previously. In this context, "a new set of local place attributes and new definitions of the accessibility of places become prominent locational determinants" (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990, 2) has developed. Some commentators have tried to operationalise the determinants of this competitiveness. Further, what is also generally accepted is that the task of urban and regional governance has increasingly become the (re)-creation of conditions sufficiently attractive to lure potential capital into the area. It is within this setting - what Hall (1995) calls the pro-competition Zeitgeist of the 1980s and 1990s; the frenetic search for different and novel ways of ensuring that one place can be **seen** to be more competitive than another – that much of the recent employment of quality of life and especially quality of life rankings can be located. In particular, the main contribution that quality of life makes in the process of capturing or ensnaring capital lies in the arena of place promotion and marketing, being part of the attempts by cities to forge distinctive images and atmospheres which "act as a lure to both capital and people 'of the right' sort' (ie wealthy and influential)" (Harvey, 1989, 295).

The calculation of comparison and ratings of cities and regions, increasingly expressed in the form of league tables, is far from new. Such ratings have however reached new heights, with even national governments presenting sets of official statistics in the form of league tables and comparative rankings – such as for education and health performance – and employing these ratings in the publicity associated with official statistics. The present spate of interest in place ratings can be traced to the publication in the US of the Places Rated Almanac (Boyer and Savageau, 1981) with its deliberative attempt to appeal to a public as well as professional audience. Since then, across many countries, there have been a wide range of different studies which – in varying degrees of academic rigour – have rated cities against cities, regions against regions, or even ranked one country against another. The intention here is not to consider these ratings as such, or indeed to explore the wide range of criticisms that many of these studies have provoked. Instead, the focus is on the ways in which such studies have initiated and

reflected the growing use of quality of life as part of the profile of a competitive city or region and to consider some of the consequences of such use.

In fact the evidence that quality of life itself and quality of life ratings matter in successfully capturing capital is sketchy. Intuitively, it can be argued that quality of life is likely to be a factor underpinning location, drawing from the fact that many new economic activities are being located in high-amenity areas, in the sun-belt of different countries and away from the older, declining industrial centres and the larger metropolitan areas. As Grayson and Young (1994, 5) rightly note, "it is some step from there to say that growth industries seek quality of life locations for their own sake". It is just as possible to argue from these trends that alternative location factors – communications, office costs and land values, labour force requirements, technological flexibility – are shaping the spatial patterns of new industrial and commercial activity.

Slowly, however, evidence is being compiled to suggest that quality of life can be a significant element in the location decision-making process. Fothergill and Gudgin's (1982) study in the UK remains much quoted, with their conclusion that environmental quality is a factor in industrial location whilst more ancedotal and case study examples reinforce this. Recent relocations in the United Kingdom have also been related to quality of life factors. Whilst many are not made public, one recently quoted example was the move of the British Council to Manchester from London. The principal 'push' factor was financial, but the final selection of where to locate was influenced by quality of life and accessibility factors (Estate Gazette, 1994).

Perhaps more convincing are surveys of industrialists and decisions-makers, such as those conducted by Healey and Baker across Europe. In their set of studies of 515 of the largest companies in the European Union over the last decade, they have consistently found that between 10% and 13% of these companies suggest that quality of life factors are amongst the absolutely essential attributes in their location decisions. Drawing on interviews with senior managers and directors with responsibility for location decision taking, these surveys illustrate the limited but nevertheless significant contribution quality of life factors make. Table 1 points to the other factors, some relating to communication, staffing or infrastructure, which were identified in the 1998 survey.

Table 1

Absolutely essential factors for locating business

Factor	% companies
Easy access to markets, customers or clients	66
Transport links with other cities and internationally	62
The quality of telecommunications	54
Cost and availability of staff	50
The climate governments create for business	36
Value for money of office space	26
Availability of office space	25
Languages spoken	22
Ease of travelling around within the city	21

The quality of life for employees	13
Freedom from pollution	12

Source: Healey and Baker (1998) European Cities Monitor p6.

Indirect evidence also points to the contribution of quality of life elements being of significance in location decision making. Senn (1995, 131) for example in his study of location factors for both manufacturing and service sectors in Milan, Italy concludes that "firms still see their production function as the main source of their competitiveness; while viewing external economics (accessibility, proximity, environment and local policies) as necessary but not sufficient conditions for their success", some elements as cost of living (56.7% indicated important), public transport (48%), safety (47%) and schools (45%) are of importance. Such findings have been reinforced by research outside of Europe, especially in the US. Hart et al. (1989) conducted surveys of 665 Chief Executive Officers in businesses across Oakland County, Michigan. From 37 factors offered in the survey, Hart et al. (1989, 610) concluded that "the most important factors to firms location in the county thus appear to be their proximity to markets and residences, the quality of the local environment, and the area's growth potential". Further they recognise that quality of life factors, along with other location factors, varied in significance between types of industry defined in terms of level of technology, but that quality of life remained an element in locating production.

An alternative line of supporting evidence has been provided by studies elsewhere in North America and in Europe which have pointed to wage differentials reflecting differences in the non-economic and quality of life opportunities on offer locally. Rosen's (1979) study was one to argue that quality of life assessment could be made based on variations in wage levels whilst Myer (1989) notes that labour costs may be reduced by the converse of the 'dis-amenity compensation' (ie. higher wages to offset lower amenities). Since then, other studies have employed this dis-amenity idea to develop economic equations to derive surrogate quality of life indices.

Privileging Capital

Whilst the case that quality of life matters in defining the location of capital remains open to debate – and offers an important agenda for research within the EU – there are a number of significant issues which arise even from the evidence presented above. In responding to the global pressures through the adoption of variants of neo-liberal agendas, those agencies and governments charged with defining the trajectories of local areas increasingly find themselves responding to the needs of capital. At one level, this is evident in the new forms of local governance and organisational responses amongst local institutions and players with the emergence of partnerships, regimes and local agencies, combining local state and voluntary sectors with capital now being commonplace (Stoker, 1990, Peck and Tickell, 1992). More generally, there has also been a tendency for city visions and trajectories to be shaped by strategies which themselves adopt some of the characteristics of capital – what Harvey (1989) suggests includes flexibility and volatility, instantaneity and disposability. A key issue, therefore, is whether in privileging capitals' needs as part of the search for competitiveness, quality of life as a concept is itself being redefined. In the remainder of the paper, this is explored in two ways: first, at a conceptual level, and secondly by discussion of definitions, the extent to which people's views of quality of are being stiffled by a capital-led agenda.

At a conceptual level, in positioning quality of life alongside the debates about 'new place attributes', one particular perspective of quality of life is being highlighted. This draws heavily on the notion of quality of life as being place based, related to the necessary conditions for

happiness or well-being within a location, and with the specific view of quality of life being conceived of as those characteristics defined against normative standards set by capital. This conception of quality of life has a long history, frequently employing social indicators as measures (McCall, 1976, Helburn, 1982). In adopting this specific notion, however, this runs counter to the growing calls for an more integrative conception of quality of life (Rogerson, 1995, Diener and Suh, 1997) in which the relative strengths of what has been a divided study are brought together. Diener and Suh (1997) call for the emphasis of normative approaches to be set alongside quality of life defined in terms of satisfaction of preferences relating to utility and choice and those which consider definitions in terms of subjective well-being. Whilst such studies in the past have not been favoured in a policy setting because of the lack of insight of prescriptive action which could be taken to improve levels of life satisfaction, recent studies have suggested that they can be brought together with other views. However, just as social scientists are overcoming of the theoretical and methodological barriers to a more integrative view of quality of life, the use of quality of life as part of city visions is pulling in a contrary direction.

In terms of the definition of quality of life being employed as a locational factor of some import, only a few studies offer clarity to which aspects of a place define quality of life. Thus for example, Healey and Baker (1998) accepting the phrase unproblematically, offering no insight into their use of the term. On the other hand, other studies, whilst listing characteristics of places, do not analyse quality of life per se but refer to a basket of attributes under this theme. Hart et al.'s (1989) survey of locational factors, for example, in Michigan does not offer respondents a category entitled 'quality of life'. Instead, the authors themselves group together responses under this heading. Thus in reaching their conclusion that "the relative importance of criteria appear to have shifted away from the 'least-cost' factors and toward those associated with area infrastructure, especially aspects of 'quality of life'." (Hart et al., 1989, 617) they include overall quality of the locality, proximity to residence, and long-term growth. Senn (1995) identifies factors including cost of living, public transport, security from crime, schools, environmental quality, housing and climate as important quality of life dimensions.

What is evident from these studies is that whilst the list of specific elements to be incorporated into a definition of quality of life varies, the focus is consistently on factors such as physical environmental, employment, crime, costs and social facilities linked to education and health. In this respect, the attributes of quality of life considered to be of relevance in the capturing of capital is consistent with those defined through social surveys of the wider population. For example in a series of surveys on Britain over the past decade, research at the University of Strathclyde has identified that crime, health, education, environment, employment, transport, living costs and leisure and shopping mark out the broad attributes of quality of life for most people (see column 1 of Table 2).

However, below the level of these broad attributes considerably less attention has been given to the ways in which people define and assess quality of life. In most studies and surveys to date, there has been considerable reticence to move beyond the incorporation of preferences and priorities of population groups attached to each of the broad attributes of quality of life. Even here, such research has been hindered by the ideological and ethical issues associated with the user having some input into the assessment of social circumstances and perceived risk of conflict between a consumer-based evaluation and that of the researcher (Lee and Marans, 1980). The inclusion of such prioritisation in US (Pierce, 1985), German (Gehrmann, 1978) and British studies (Rogerson et al., 1989, 1990) has suggested that such concerns can be overcome. Further, there has been concern that individual and collective priorities may be subject to temporal and spatial specificity (Pacione, 1982). Table 2 points to the relative

stability in the priorities of the British public in defining the main attributes of quality of life. Drawing on two identically administered national surveys conducted in 1990 and 1997 of samples of adults drawn to be representative of the national demographic profile, the results point to considerable stability in the priorities attached to each attribute. Each column identifies the proportion of the samples who considered the attributes to be 'very important' in their definition of quality of life. Health, crime, and cost of living provide the main priorities, whilst at the other end of the scale, shopping and sports and leisure facilities were amongst the less important concerns.

Table 2

Quality of life priorities: views from Britain

Attribute	1990 Survey	1997 Survey
	% respondents indicating attribute 'very important'	
Crime		
Level of violent crime	71.7	64.6
Level of non-violent crime	65.7	65.1
Health		
Health facilities	70.3	63.5
Education		
Education provision	57.1	54.2
Environment		
Pollution levels	56.1	53.4
Access to areas of scenic quality	33.0	34.3
Climate	25.3	28.3
Employment		
Employment prospects	49.5	47.8
Unemployment levels	41.1	40.8
Wage levels	45.2	38.6
Living costs		
Cost of living	58.8	58.5
Housing costs	49.4	45.5
Leisure and Shopping		
Shopping facilities	43.8	33.8
Leisure facilities	21.4	26.4
Sports facilities	23.8	23.2
Transport		
Travel to work times	36.1	35.6
Sample size	2225 adults	1718 adults

Source: Author's surveys

In one of the few studies to date to explore the specific elements of quality of life important to people, Bowling's (1995) study of 2000 adults in Britain offers one insight. She asked respondents to identify the most important things in their current lives. The results identified that for 31% of the sample the first most important element was 'relationships with

family/relatives', whilst 'own health' (23%), 'health of someone close/relations etc' (20%) and 'finances,/housing/standard of living' (10%) were also of significance. Whilst this study does mark out new ground in enabling respondents to generate their own commentaries on quality of life, it does not attempt to equate these with specific place-based attributes and thus is more difficult to relate to the views of capital.

People's views of quality of life

In 1997 as part of a research project exploring people's views of their quality of life in different parts of urban Britain, a national survey of 1718 adults was conducted to identify in more detail the ways in which quality of life attributes are defined. The sample of respondents was drawn from across Britain and was demographically and socio-economically representative of the national population. Conducted as face-to-face interviews in people's homes, the opinion survey asked them to identify the relative importance of a wide range of possible characteristics of each of the main attributes of attributes. Each respondent was asked to score these characteristics on a scale from 1 to 5 if of importance or 0 if irrelevant. Each list of characteristics had previously been derived from a series of focus groups of different population groups held in three British cities, and were generated to offer a wide range of characteristics reflecting issues of access, availability and experience of each attribute. Thus, for example, in relation to the health attribute of quality of life, each respondent was offered the following characteristics on each of which they were asked to identify the relevance to them in their quality of life:

- Short waiting times when visiting your GP
- Local access to hospital
- Friendly and caring local doctor
- Quick response time by local ambulance in case of emergency
- Short hospital waiting times
- Keeping fit
- A healthy diet
- Access to good health advice
- Adequate health care for special needs groups

The second column of Table 3 indicates those characteristics which were identified as 'very important' by more than 70% of the 1718 respondents (level 1 characteristics) and the final column those additional features considered very important by more than 50% of the national sample (level 2 characteristics).

The purpose of presenting these data is not to produce a detailed account of the patterns of concerns amongst the British public on each attribute or indeed to seek some explanatory accounts for the patterns identified. Whilst may of the outcomes of the surveys are expected – for example in relation to crime or employment – there are certainly some intriguing results nevertheless. For example, respondents indicate that they are more concerned about aspects of health care provision than with aspects of personal health (none were rated very important by 50% of respondents), but yet more concerned about the experiences at school than with education facilities per se. We employ the table here, however, to illustrate a number of key points about the potential divergence between quality of life as used to capture capital and to fit the agendas of such capital, and the ways in which quality of life is seen by the public more generally. We conclude by way of three points.

First, and perhaps most obviously, in using quality of life as part of place promotion, a selective and partial view of quality of life is often being presented. The tendency is either to focus only on the overall, or 'total' quality of life – most evidently in the rating methods – or to

be portraying quality of life as only those positive attributes. More generally, league tables epitomise the desire for what could be termed a 'reductionist view' of places and their living environments comes to the fore. The representation of the complexity which is urban living by a single value and rank is appealing in an era when politicians, media and public work with simple headlines. But in so doing, such ratings are open to challenge for offering simplicity at the expense of reflecting the multiple facets of a locality which for most people reflects the living environment. What is evident from the survey is that amongst the public there is a awareness that quality of life involves a wide range of attributes and characteristics and is itself a balance between assets and weaknesses.

Second, the actual experience of aspects of quality of life associated with urban living is highlighted in the table. In this respect, there has been a tendency to emphasise characteristics of the environment in terms of availability, accessibility, and efficiency of provision (Rogerson et al., 1996) viewing the city or region as a product to be consumed. Whilst this may indeed reflect the key issues of capital considering location decisions, the survey points to the importance of the quality of the experience of consumption which – although often ignored in social research (Urry, 1990) – is an important element. In this respect, for example, it is not merely the provision of schools, teachers or facilities which mark out people's concerns about education, it is also the experienced elements of school life which are of concern (Table 3). Whilst some insight into differential quality of life can be evaluated through measures of access and provision, it is only when dimensions of experience are added that the 'city ratings' will be more meaningful to people.

Thirdly, the table highlights the emphasis that is placed on non-economic factors in defining quality of life, especially elements of social and environmental aspects of life; those characteristics which traditionally have not been viewed as important by capital and indeed often left to the state to deliver. However as the state is itself increasingly being re-aligned, drawn into the desire for greater economic competitiveness, there is a real chance of these aspects of quality of life being neglected. Other commentators have drawn out the clear shift in the emphasis of local government across Europe and elsewhere from welfare provision to a post-welfare agenda (Peck and Tickell, 1992). Caught up in this, the significant weight given by people to local social facilities and physical environment – and key characteristics of them – is being overshadowed by other concerns, only some of which resonant with the public's notion of a quality living environment.

What Table 3 illustrates above all however is that the shift towards a capital-led agenda for local areas is likely to be self-defeating unless attention continues to be given to the wide range of quality of life concerns of people. Whilst as the survey highlights economic issues are important – including job security and economic costs – a vision for the future of the city or region which fails to address the issues of health, education, crime and the environment, is unlikely to one which attracts people, and thus the labour force required to sustain competitiveness.

Conclusion

The notions of partnerships between state, communities and capital which we noted earlier in the paper have been seen as the new organisational regime to advance well-being, may provide a structure through which a balance between the concerns of capital and those of the public can be married. The evidence to data however suggests that the imbalance of power and influence in such partnerships favours capital, and local states and agencies have adopted - and adapted - quality of life to fit the notions of capital. In so doing, there has been a diminution of emphasis on those characteristics of quality of lfie which matter to people.

The recently published report from the Urban Task Force in Britain (Rogers, 1999) has for the first time however marked out a new way of looking at the future of cities and lifestyle. With its emphasis firmly on design, social inclusion and environmental responsibility and explicit reference to the need to address people's concerns about the quality of life on offer in British cities (and by implication non-urban areas as well) there is at last signs that government is more serious about 'making space' for people's quality of life. This may indeed mark a shift from the partnership-based approaches, the traditional focus on employment-led strategies of regeneration and the constructed utopian visions of earlier times. In so doing, there may well be scope for some of the characteristics identified in Table 3 to become part of the agenda to reinvigorate the urban fabric of Britain.

There is, however, a real sense in which making space of people's views of quality of life does not mean neglecting the concerns of capital. As Turok (1999, 909-10) recently cautions, "the need to increase the quantity of suitable employment opportunities in order to raise local incomes, reduce poverty and retain and attract population" is still an important element of the quality of life equation. The failure to find a balance between quality of life and employment element will only produce an unsustainable, uncompetitive city. The competitive city in the 21st century requires both. The challenge remaining, therefore, is not to bow to either capital's needs or public notions, but to seek a path which threads between them.

Acknowledgements

The research on which this paper is based formed part of the 'The Good Life' series of programmes screened in Britain on Channel 4. Support from Wall to Wall Television Ltd is gratefully acknowledged. The views expressed here are the author's alone.

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Table 3

Important Characteristics of Quality of Life

Quality of Life Attribute	**'Level 1' characteristics** (very important to more than 70% of respondents)		**'Level 2' characteristics** (very important to between 50% & 70% of respondents)
Health	Quick response time by ambulance in case of emergency Adequate health care for special needs groups Friendly and caring local doctor		Local access to hospital Short hospital waiting times Short waiting times when visiting GP
Education	Absence of bullying as school Highly motivated teachers Good school security That children enjoy school life		Small classes in primary and secondary schools Access to well resourced library
Transport	-		Reliable and well maintained transport facilities affordable transport options congestion-free roads frequent local bus services to town centre being within walking distance of public transport good car parking in town centre
Crime	That your home is safe Quick response time by police when called/alarm goes off Low levels of recorded violent crime Active measures against neighbourhood vandalism		That cars are safe from crime Friendly neighbours Local police station

Environment	Access for everyone to local facilities Low levels of pollution		Clean streets Protection of the environment Pedestrian-friendly streets Clean/pleasant natural surroundings Local open spaces/parklands Living in a quiet environment
Leisure/Shopping	-		-
Employment	Job security Low levels of unemployment		Growth in local employment
Living Costs	-		Cost houses/rents Cost of food locally